

A little parcel of commitment

I figure I had just about recovered from my brief trip to Vietnam when the letter came from a pilot I'd met during a five-day visit to the carrier *Midway*. That is, I was getting over the shock of returning to a land where Cassius Clay's right hand and John Lindsay's party loyalty are important topics. I had almost reached the point where I could read about the teach-ins without getting sore and had nearly stopped feeling hostile toward people who asked me wasn't Hong Kong a more swinging town than Saigon. In short, I was in the midst of a bland process of disengagement-through-homercoming. High school graduations, summer plans and the bills had begun to resume their normal staggering priorities.

The letter from the pilot halted that process abruptly. Its most important paragraph read, "Your message of greetings was delivered to each man you named except Commander Jim LaHaye. I am grieved to report that Jim was killed on May 8 during a strike on Vinh airfield. Jim rolled in on a flak suppression run just moments before our bombing runs. We dove through a barrage of anti-aircraft and Commander LaHaye's aircraft was hit. He managed to fly to the coast, but glided into the sea without ejecting."

The strange gentleness of those final words took me right back to the carrier. They seemed especially appropriate to Jim LaHaye, with whom I had passed an afternoon about a week before he "glided into the sea without ejecting." Commanding officer of a squadron of F-8 Crusaders aboard the *Midway*, he was a thoroughly polite and modest man, and as he walked me around the flight deck and showed me his big jets with the shark's teeth painted around their engine intakes, he was so low-pressure he could have been showing me a stand of tomato plants. But for all his quiet diffidence, the quality of total engagement was there. In the course of our conversation, LaHaye, 41, an Annapolis graduate and father of three, told me that he'd had a day ashore at Saigon recently. Instead

of spending the night sacked out in an air-conditioned hotel or simply going out on the town, LaHaye bummed a ride in an armed helicopter and went off on an overnight visit to a friend who was an Army adviser at a particularly dangerous and exposed Vietnamese village.

I doubt that LaHaye attached any special importance to his visit. He wanted to see his friend and—beyond that—he wanted to have a look at the war from a vantage point other than his own. But his act illustrated for me a reality I saw everywhere in Vietnam. It is a one-subject, single-preoccupation country, and no American I talked to was much interested in anything but the struggle that is going on there. They bitch about the heat and the food, gab about home and sex, but mainly they are fascinated, even obsessed, with the problems at hand. Some people may say—quite wrongly I think—that many of these men are war-lovers. It seems more logical to me that their vulnerable position at the very swordpoint of the conflict demands total engagement. They give it, and it is an astonishing thing to see. It is also contagious for the passerby.

In Vinh Long, a Mekong Delta town 60 miles south of Saigon, many of the Americans live in a three-story building which serves as an advisers' hotel. The men there are attached to Vietnamese units of many kinds: infantry, artillery, river forces, and they go back and forth almost daily between the hotel and their work, which is the continuous battle against the Vietcong who abound in the area. Armed commuters in jeeps, helicopters and boats, they go about the job of regularly exposing themselves to death in an utterly professional manner. The operations are planned and carried out without heroics or fanfare, and the lucky man can even get back in time for a shower before dinner. I suppose it's possible that danger as a routine way of life would be enormously attractive to some, but I found more compelling than that a sense of agreement among these men that they were engaged in necessary business.

This contagion of purpose extends beyond the military. I had dinner one night in Saigon at the apartment of a U.S. Operations Mission official whose wife had returned to the United States when the dependents were moved from

Vietnam in February. With us at dinner was another official whose family had gone home, too. For much of the evening we talked about the USOM men who work in unprotected isolation in remote parts of the country, and we speculated about whether or not the Vietcong would begin a systematic campaign of harassment and murder against them. Until now they had not, but the heavy buildup of American forces might cause a retaliatory change. The conversation then shifted to the subject of what these two men would do when their tours of Vietnam duty were up, a matter of a few months in both cases. Both felt—absent families or not—that it was entirely possible they might decide when the time came that they *must* remain in Vietnam, that it would be close to desertion to leave.

The day before I left Vietnam I was drinking beer in a group that included two Marine lieutenants, one an American, the other his Vietnamese counterpart. The American held his head as if he had a slightly stiff neck, and it turned out that a Vietcong bullet had grazed his cheek and jaw, entered the side of his neck and then emerged from the back of it, leaving a hole about two inches long. A couple of us, holding our beer bottles well away from the nearly healed wound, examined it, and when I remarked that it looked as if it itched, the Marine agreed that it did. Then, tired of being the center of attention, he called out to the Vietnamese across the room: "Show 'em yours. Han. Show 'em yours." Smiling shyly, the Vietnamese Marine unbuttoned his dungaree shirt and revealed two completely healed wounds high in his chest. Then he pointed to another on his right forearm and finally to a fourth on his right hand which made one of the fingers considerably shorter than it should have been. Members of an exclusive club, the two Marines grinned at each other.

I did not envy them the price of initiation, but I do remember wishing that I somehow could extract for myself some small, civilian piece of their commitment. Away, now, from that one-subject country, back in the land of ghost punches and silly politics, a letter from a carrier tells me that I caught that little piece, and I hope I can keep it.